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ABSTRACT

Until recently, the model of student support operating at Sheffield City Polytechnic (SCP) in England involved pairing each student with a tutor, defining an entitlement of time for the student, specifying a minimum time commitment for which the tutor is required to be available, and leaving it up to the tutor and student to get together as best they can. A number of factors have put this personal tutorial system under great strain, including the tutors' other responsibilities for research and course development, the premium placed upon career advice, financial constraints, the development of unit-based course structures, and the invalidation of unspoken assumptions about the characteristics of polytechnic students and their needs for support. In many departments, the lecturer with overall responsibility for the first year of a particular course was becoming a key figure in student support. Yet in most cases, the first-year tutors, if not actually ill-equipped, felt ill-prepared for such a role. In view of all of these difficulties, it was proposed that a unit for tutorial development be created to: (1) insure that tutors have adequate information about SCP; (2) assist teaching staff in their role as tutors to individual students; (3) offer professional support to tutors and establish links with external agencies which offer advice to students; (4) provide training opportunities for staff to update their knowledge and skills and enhance their understanding of student problems; and (5) advise course leaders and course planning committees. There can be no possibility of implementing such a far-reaching scheme until the school's current funding upheavals have subsided. In the immediate future, efforts shall focus on investigating tutors' problems and practices, preparing training materials, learning how students help each other, and examining course induction procedures. In addition, staff members with an interest in student support will be eligible for enrollment in a newly created course in "Study Support and Tutoring." (ALB)

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IMPROVING STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS THROUGH STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN AN ENGLISH POLYTECHNIC

John Earwaker

Sheffield City Polytechnic

Paper for presentation to Midwest Regional Conference (Chicago)
at Oak Brook, Illinois, April 13-15, 1989.

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IMPROVING STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS THROUGH STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN AN ENGLISH POLYTECHNIC

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This paper is written from a UK perspective. Within the UK, two strands of higher education are clearly discernible: one is the traditional university sector, the other that of the polytechnics and other colleges. This so-called 'binary system' of HE continues to be reflected in the latest legislation.

The oldest universities of Oxford and Cambridge were groupings of small self-governing colleges, each of which was organised as a community. Typically, the living accommodation, dining hall, library and chapel were all clustered round a cloistered quadrangle, embodying ideals of shared residence, shared scholarship, shared religion and even shared leisure. This model has been, and continues to be, a powerful influence on the development of English higher education. It explains why student support has been conceived very much in terms of 'pastoral care', with religious and moral overtones. At the same time it holds up an ideal in which staff-student relationships are built around intimate and relaxed one-to-one tutorials, and student-student relationships are encouraged by extensive opportunity for peer support. It is an ideal after which we continue to hanker. It is impossible to understand current HE provision in the UK without recognising the extent to which it has been shaped by this tradition, both by development of it and by reaction against it.

At first glance it might appear that a Polytechnic, formed as recently as 1967 by amalgamating existing local-authority colleges with a primarily vocational emphasis, is quite free from the 'Oxbridge' tradition, and that it orders its student support provision in a way that owes nothing to the medieval university and its elite, independent, small-scale, single-sex, religious-foundation colleges. A polytechnic has, after all, a quite different set of priorities, which include: comprehensive higher education; equal opportunities for all; links with, and service to, the local community; responsiveness to the needs of the national economy. In any case, successive waves of higher education expansion have moved the tradition on. Civic universities founded at the end of the 19th century ('redbrick'), post-world-war-two developments ('plateglass'), out-of-town 'campus' universities, city-centre 'technological' universities - each of these types added its own distinctive ethos, while still recognising in its retention of the title 'university' some elements of continuity with the past. The foundation of 30 polytechnics at the end of the 1960's, the

last great wave of institutional expansion (since then most expansion has occurred not through establishing new institutions but through existing institutions growing in size), represented an explicit break with the university tradition. The whole point was that they should be a different kind of institution, offering a different kind of HE.

Yet somehow it has not worked out quite like that. It is true that the Polytechnics were meant to start with a clean sheet and develop their own identity; and to a large extent it is true that they have been the most flexible, responsive, and innovative providers of HE in Britain over the last 20 years. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of student services. The polytechnics have been much better than most universities in recognising, for example, the need for counselling provision. They have quickly established Departments of Student Services offering a comprehensive service, providing help with accommodation, medical attention, careers advice, counselling, etc., and this has been seen as an important part of the Polytechnic's work. From the start, however, it was felt that every student should have a personal relationship with at least one tutor, and almost all of the new polytechnics developed a system of personal tutors whereby tutors each took responsibility for a small number of students - not necessarily students who attended any of his or her classes - and made themselves available to them for informal discussion about their work and progress. It was fully expected that this might develop into something approaching a personal friendship. Sheffield Polytechnic, the second to be founded and the second largest, has from its earliest days operated this scheme for every full-time student.

It will be obvious that in recent years this system has come under a good deal of pressure. There has always been, of course, tension between teaching and research: tutors have other responsibilities which they have to balance against concern for their students - that is a perennial problem. But it has been exacerbated by rapid initial expansion of student numbers into the early 1970's, coupled with pressure to innovate and to secure validation for new courses. As publicly funded institutions, lacking - until April 1989 - the independence of the universities, the polytechnics have been subject to financial pressures and economic constraints, which have borne much more heavily on the public sector institutions, through the 1970's and into the 1980's. At the same time the polytechnics have sought to widen access to non-traditional students, and to do so on scant resources. But such students are likely to need particular help and support. Staff sometimes feel overwhelmed by the demands upon them, and these are not the best circumstances in which to expect attentive concern for students' individual needs. Inevitably, the personal tutorial system has come under great strain. Again, the vocational emphasis of polytechnics has put a higher premium on careers advice. Whereas traditional universities have tended to provide

a specialised but liberal education for most students and have simply offered what careers help they could, treating it as in the last resort the student's affair as to precisely how - or even whether - they subsequently made use of their degree, the polytechnics have tended if anything to reinforce the expectation that courses successfully completed lead to jobs. Unfortunately it is an expectation that cannot always be fulfilled and for the last few years has been quite problematic. In these circumstances, demand has risen for a careers service which is both interested in developing the student's own self-understanding and is closely related to the course he or she is following. Two further pressures have arisen in the polytechnics generally, and in SCP in particular. One is the 'incorporation' of polytechnics from April 1989; this is requiring a great deal of careful budgetting within institutions for the time being. The other is the development of unit-based course structures which, it is widely recognised, presuppose enhanced resources for student support and advice. These are just some of the contemporary pressures on polytechnics in the UK at the present time.

The cumulative effect of all these pressures is that the personal tutorial system has come under great strain; more than that, its very presuppositions have been called into question.

For some time there has been a resourcing problem, in that the system in use at SCP for many years - notional allocation of 7½ minutes per student per week - is no longer feasible. The scale of this provision says much for SCP's commitment to the idea of student support through the academic department. However, the institution is now seeking ways of supporting students that are more cost-effective. Interestingly, the style of what has hitherto been provided originally derived from traditional models of pastoral care. So the issue is not simply a matter of developing systems of student support that are more effective and less costly, but of identifying more precisely what is supposed to be available through the support of academic staff, who needs it, and what it is for.

It is apparent that a number of unspoken assumptions have been operating. They need only to be stated for it to be clear that they no longer apply. For instance, it is assumed that most students are school-leavers, aged 18 or 19 years; that they do not live locally; that in coming away from home they have taken what is for them a big step, possibly for the first time in their lives, towards independence from their families; that they are studying full-time, and have little or no contact with the wider social environment beyond the campus; that while careful selection should have ensured that they have the potential to cope with the demands of their course, in practice they may have difficulty in concentrating on their studies when the student environment provides so many distractions; that even if they have difficulties with their courses, they are nonetheless likely to find their studies intrinsically

interesting - perhaps even intellectually exciting - or failing that to be be driven by the ulterior motive that their efforts can be relied on to take them into their chosen career; that their tutors, a generation older than themselves and possessing a certain wisdom that comes from experience of life, will naturally take an interest in them - a personal interest, not just an academic or professional one; that academic staff will want nothing better than to take an interest in their proteges, and will have no difficulty in finding time and space for this; that the structure of the course, the layout of the buildings and the timetabling of classes will inevitably make this easy and natural.

Almost all of these statements are now untrue. More and more of our students are of mature age. Many live locally. Even for those who have left their parents' home and 'come away to college' at the age of 18 or so, this is rarely felt to be the huge turning-point in their lives it once was; these days they have often done a good deal of travelling and have already established themselves away from home as independent and confident adults. For many, the trauma of family break-up will have occured some years before when their parents split up. If they are 'homesick' it is more likely that they are missing their sexual partner than their mother. Many of them will quickly settle into local accommodation which they will come to regard as 'home' - with occasional 'visits' to their parents perhaps. Some will get part-time work in the local community to supplement their grants. Many of them will be part-time students in any case. On the other hand, few will have much idea of what to expect of student life. Many of them will be the first person in their family to have a college education, and their perceptions will have been coloured by popular images in the media. Perhaps they will not know how much work is expected, or how to work on their own. They will probably not be expecting it to be particularly stressful - they are much more worried about social relationships than about the course itself. They may not be very interested in their subject of study for its own sake - nor may they have much hope that it will guarantee them a job; rather, they are likely to have a vague idea that graduation of itself is a worthwhile goal and must in the long run enhance their prospects in any field. Their tutors are, indeed, likely to be a a good bit older than they are (though mature students may easily find themselves being taught by people younger than themselves), but it is unlikely that they will feel any automatic respect for them as belonging to an older generation; on the contrary, they are more likely to feel that their tutors could be somewhat out of touch with the real world and lacking in worldly wisdom. In this they may be right; their tutors may be the first to admit that they have no special skills in counselling nor any special wisdom in coping with life's problems - and their own personal lives may be in some disarray. Tutors are also likely to feel under extreme pressure. Some who genuinely care about students as persons they may be hesitant to signal a ready availablity

for fear of being deluged with student problems; so for all kinds of reasons, tutors may prefer to keep their distance. Institutional arrangements will almost inevitably reinforce this in ways that make casual out-of-class encounters quite rare, and contrived ones awkward. It is very likely that many of the tutors will be part-time; increasingly fulltime staff are being temporarily replaced by part-timers as the only means by which secondments, special projects, and conferences, can be resourced. Perhaps more than anything else, the breaking up of what have previously been straight-through three-year courses into discrete units of study for credit-accumulation, together with the development of new and flexible systems of transfer, often renders a personal tutorial system unworkable.

For all these reasons, it is quite impossible to go back to a model of student support which simply pairs a student and a tutor, defines an entitlement of time for the student, specifies a minimum commitment for which the tutor is required to be available, and then leaves it to the two of them to get together as best they can. At SCP this has long been recognised, and there are ongoing discussions as to the best way forward; meantime a number of schemes have been implemented on an experimental basis, and are being carefully monitored.

The current initiative arises from a proposal, put forward in July 1988, for the appointment of a coordinator for First Year Tutors throughout the Polytechnic. The argument was advanced that in many departments the lecturer with overall responsibility for the first year of a particular course was becoming a key figure in the perception of students, and was increasingly being used as a first line of student support. The presenter of this paper has many years of experience in this role, covering several different courses and working in more than one department; there is plenty of evidence to suggest that - at least in SCP - the problems of first year students outweigh those of all the other years put together. Inevitably, as student numbers have grown and the organisation of courses has become more complex, students have tended to focus on the First Year Tutor as their first point of contact with the institution over any problem.

Yet in most cases tutors, if not actually ill-equipped, feel ill-prepared for such a role. Some undertake it as a purely administrative job and only subsequently discover its potential for student support. Others deliberately undertake the role because it gives them direct contact with students of the sort that they find most fulfilling. But there is little institutional recognition of this role; indeed, as the teaching unions in the UK have been quick to point out, in many departments a conscientious First Year Tutor could be trying to fulfil the role of personal tutor for a large number of students. In view of all these difficulties it was proposed that the polytechnic should appoint someone to investigate

this, and to act as a resource person for such tutors who might be under pressure and themselves in need of support.

It was immediately clear that to make such a proposal at SCP was to knock on an open door. The institution is thoroughly committed to the importance of student support, and does not wish to diminish current provision. At the same time, there remains the need to provide student support in the most cost-effective manner possible. Any systems that deliver effective student support with limited resources are assured of institutional approval.

At the next stage of discussions it was suggested that a rather more ambitious proposal would be in order. Whereas the original suggestion had been for one half-time post as coordinator of all first year tutors (there are more than 40 separate degree courses offered at SCP, and in nearly every case one tutor is designated as carrying responsibility for the first year), it was now proposed that the brief be widened to embrace student support throughout all years. The implications of this were drawn out: what was needed was no mere half-time post, but nothing less than a unit for tutorial development, staffed full-time and with the potential for further development. The aim would be to facilitate the process by which students are given help, support and advice, in their departments and through their courses. The following specific objectives were identified:

a) to assist teaching staff in their role as tutors to individual students.

b) to liaise closely with providers of specalised services to students and ensure that tutors are fully briefed about the services the Polytechnic provides.

c) to establish and maintain links with appropriate external agencies which offer, or could offer, advice and help to Polytechnic students.

d) to encourage the further development of academic support services in respect of study skills and learning resources.

e) to offer professional support to tutors, and especially First Year Tutors, in their role as academic and personal advisers; this might eventually take the form of a consultancy service, a referral agency, and (exceptionally) a referral service.

f) to provide training opportunities for staff to update their knowledge and skills to enable them to operate more effectively as tutors to individual students.

g) to advise course leaders and course planning committees on ways of establishing adequate systems of student support.

h) to initiate staff development activities to enhance tutors' understanding of students' problems.

i) to raise the general level of awareness in the Polytechnic about student life as it is actually experienced, and about the need for and value of adequate student support.

j) to monitor and evaluate various forms of student support, and make formal recommendations to the Polytechnic about further developments.

k) to establish and maintain professional contact with colleagues in other institutions, and continue to exchange ideas and information.

Discussion of possible priorities among this list shows up different approaches. There is undoubtedly a straightforward need to provide information for tutors (b) and to develop their interpersonal skills (f); however, on its own this may be too modest an objective. Students need tutors who are not just well-briefed and skilled but who have some understanding of people, of human problems, and of the helping process (h). Another approach might focus on the provision of support for tutors (e), initially offering them help rather than education. But there is a risk of all these activities appearing very marginal to the work of the institution. The view taken here is that it is essential at some point to try to influence course structures and student support systems (g and j), if student support is to be taken seriously within the institution (i).

There can be no question, unfortunately, of implementing any such far-reaching scheme until the current upheavals caused by the alteration of polytechnics' funding arrangements have subsided. However, in the meantime the presenter of this paper has been asked to undertake a two term project related to student support and tutoring, with a view to initiating in-house staff development in this area. This is to run from April to December 1989. The remainder of this paper describes some work already planned, outlines possible developments during this period, and suggests issues for consideration in the longer term.

The following have been suggested as possible steps to take in the immediate future:

- systematically discuss with First Year Tutors the kinds of problems they routinely deal with; the other agencies they are aware of and make use of; the kind of help they feel they need; the points at which they feel 'out of their depth'.

- on the basis of this, offer staff training sessions; construct a programme of staff seminars and workshops. In due course, develop these ad hoc sessions into an award-bearing course.

- investigate current practice in different parts of the institution; identify 'good practice' and give it publicity; find out students' perceptions of what is offered, and set up occasions when this can be fed back to tutors.

- prepare training materials (e.g. audio and video tape recordings of interviews with students, tutorials, etc.) for subsequent analysis.

- investigate how much students help eachother. Try to isolate factors which make this more likely.

- examine and compare course induction procedures. How are these perceived by incoming students? Are there general principles which can be drawn from this? Are there common problems faced by students at the point of entry to the course?

- are there 'peak periods' for student problems? If there are any discernible patterns, how do they relate to the courses, e.g. terms, vacations, placements, etc...

The problem here seems again to be that while it is not difficult to think of issues to be explored and investigated, it is hard to see what to concentrate on first. There is inevitably pressure to provide staff training, yet the feeling persists that this goes neither wide enough nor deep enough. Training events will be attended only by staff who are already enthusiasts for student support; and staff need more than training in skills, they need the opportunity to understand students in a new way. At the very least, ad hoc training events should count for credit; ideally they should be built into a struture leading to a named award such as a diploma.

This was the point reached in February 1989, when the surprise announcement of a new staff development initiative suddenly made possible the hurried planning of a complete study unit in Study Support and Tutoring, to start in October 1989. PSET units (Professional Studies in Education and Training) are units of study intended primarily for in-house staff development. They will be open to all polytechnic staff, and will also be offered to staff members of other local colleges. All units are to be at 'M-level', i.e. by successful completion of 4 units plus a dissertation one gains a Master's degree.

The unit's purpose is stated as follows:
"to foster the professional development of course members so that they are better able to understand and respond to students' needs. It is recognised that student progress is closely related to personal circumstances and that tutors are sometimes required to offer personal as well as academic and professional support. This unit aims both to develop tutors' knowledge and understanding of the student's situation and to provide training in appropriate support and tutoring skills."

The syllabus is divided into 4 sections: a) the student's experience, b) the tutor's skills, c) the helping relationship, and d) systems of support. Brian Oldham, of Teesside Polytechnic, who is acting as external assessor for the unit, has commented that it is well conceived and that there is an urgent need for such courses which develop staff's student-related skills at a point in time when big changes are taking place in the organisation of the HE system.

Although it is recognised that enrolment for this unit is likely to consist of staff members who are already most keen to develop student support, the unit is likely to become a focus for a good deal of internal discussion; there are bound to be spin-off effects. It is hoped that it will raise the profile of the student support function within the institution and alert other staff to its importance, as well as encouraging course participants in their development as tutors. Further, both through the study unit and through other staff development activities it is hoped to give renewed currency to the idea of student support delivered via members of academic staff in the normal course of carrying out their jobs. It seems important to resist the widespread misconception that student support is some kind of extra, 'bolted-on' to normal provision, available 'if needed', on hand to cope with 'problems'. Many students would not wish to define themselves as either as being or having a problem; even if acknowledged it may not be possible for it to be named. Such students would certainly not seek out specialist help - yet they benefit from, and are grateful for, the kind of personal relationship which can be offered by a member of staff within an academic department in the ordinary run of events. There <u>are</u> times when it helps to talk to a stranger, someone you do not have to face in class next day; but I can vouch for the fact that many students, in the UK at least, would rather talk to a friendly member of the department staff, at least initially, about a personal problem than seek an appointment with a specialist counsellor. It is every tutor's experience that minor worries may be raised at a point where they appear - and are - quite trivial; yet one never really knows whether some of these, if not discussed in this way, might not have developed into much larger problems before long.

Besides these rather vague hopes for changes in the climate, which might gradually be brought about by these staff development initiatives, there is something else which might be brought closer by these developments: a move towards the development of course-based provision, in which student support is seen as integral to the course itself. This seems the only direction in which development can now go. Of course, there is no 'one best way' of delivering student support, and there may still be small departments where tutorial provision can be made independently of the actual course being followed; but increasingly these are the exception, not the rule. The general trend must be towards locating whatever student support is

thought necessary (and this includes study skills) not as some kind of institutional 'extra' tacked on to the course for those who need it but as part of the core course available to all students and clearly signed as important. In the UK context it has perhaps been possible to go on for much longer than elsewhere, kidding ourselves that large did not mean impersonal and that just because our institutions were expanding in size we did not have to relinquish our traditions of personal ('pastoral') care for students. However, it is doubtful whether we should try to continue in this tradition much longer, except in a few unusual cases where small size or peculiar intimacy of contact prevails.

In conclusion, what stands out here is the tension in the UK between the elite tradition of HE and the development of mass provision. We have widened access, but with the exception of the Open University we do not have open access; we are still inclined to think in terms of selecting those who are ready to profit from HE rather than to accept all comers and concentrate on the problem of retention. As our HE system has expanded, it has become increasingly obvious that large sections of it must be at least primarily devoted to teaching. This clashes with our traditional assumption about universities as places for the advancement of learning. We simply cannot afford, nor is it sensible, to allow all our HE institutions to give the same priority to research. It is almost inevitable that before long we shall be compelled to identify certain institutions - and perhaps certain departments within certain institutions - as centres of research. Other parts of the HE system will then be clearly recognised as having as their main rationale and their overriding concern the transformation of students into effective learners. It may not be too much to hope that, once this is explicitly recognised, in many institutions there may be a new willingness to put not only teaching ability first rather than research record but to identify in teaching staff those student-related skills which make them effective as counsellors and advisers of students. This shift of institutional purpose may make it possible for skilled student support to figure much more prominently in UK institutions of HE than it has done hitherto.

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